

# Journey of a thousand miles

The International Renewable Energy Agency in Abu Dhabi has a new Interim Director-General. He wants to build up the young organisation with diplomacy and optimism.

**A** baby that has to be built up from nothing,” said Hélène Pelosse of the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) back in July. Just a few months later she made the surprise announcement that she would step down from her position as Interim Director-General. She made no official comment on the decision. Nevertheless, it is doubtless that her tenure was anything but pleasant. First was the clash with Greenland over the organisation’s statute, and then came the sluggish payment of membership dues. “Built from nothing” can thus be taken quite literally. Adnan Zaheer Amin, Interim Director-General since November 2010, is now in charge of getting the organisation back on track. The first plenary session will take place in early April. At the meeting, the director for the next four years will be selected.

## Ambassador for renewables

Amin, 53, has a career that has destined him to build an international organisation which according to its statute will be a “driving force” for encouraging the broad-based global use of renewable energies, and

in so doing, will provide practical advice and support to both industry and developing countries. “When I was offered the position, I immediately told them that if they wanted someone who could explain the technical issues, I was the wrong person, but as an ambassador of the great opportunities offered by the use of renewable energies, I’m the right choice,” Amin explains.

Originally from Kenya, the economist is specialised in the environment and sustainable development. Initially, he was involved with development issues; first at the Institute of Development Studies of the University of Sussex in the United Kingdom, then at the World Bank, and later at the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). Among Amin’s responsibilities at the UN was the direction of a programme dedicated to improving the environmental situation in developing countries. Later, he led the UNEP office at UN headquarters in New York and coordinated cooperation between the two institutions.

Amin’s next stop is Abu Dhabi City, which houses the offices of IRENA’s 38 employees. Amin considers the emirate a suitable location. After all, as he pointed



Penultimate session of the Preparatory Commission in October 2010 before the first plenary meeting will take place at the beginning of April.

Photos (2): IRENA



# Imagine

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With a 240Wp solar module

It can replace 3 barrels of oil energy

Solar Energy, that reduces risks of global warming...

Supports a younger, healthier earth



out in his first official appearance in early December 2010 at a German-Arab media dialogue, “Abu Dhabi has a vision of transformation and change.” By “vision” Amin was referring less to the oil state’s 2020 target of 7% renewables than to its Masdar City project, intended to be the world’s first carbon-emissions-free city. Masdar City will also serve as a science and industrial centre for green technologies and is supposed to house IRENA by 2015 at the latest. Pelosse recently voiced a different view. She complained of inexperienced employees from the emirates, as well as a lack of support from the United Arab Emirates, which brought the institution’s headquarters to its country. Bonn and Vienna also applied to host the headquarters of the secretariat.

Amin is making a go of diplomacy. He emphasised the key role of Hermann Scheer – the SPD parliamentarian and winner of the Alternative Nobel Prize who died in October 2010 – in founding the International Agency for Renewable Energies. IRENA is the life’s work of the German, which is why no small number of people would have liked to see the agency in Bonn. Amin appreciates these sensitivities, adroitly navigating diplomatic circles, even when delicate energy supply issues come up. This attitude is apparent in Amin’s answer to a question from an Arab participant about the agency’s view of the Arab states’ growing interest in nuclear power plants. Four such plants are planned for the diminutive

Abu Dhabi alone. Amin responded that while “every country must decide the issue of nuclear power on its own and atomic energy is getting increasingly safer, the risks remain.” Furthermore, Amin added that the question of what to do with nuclear waste was still open. The way he says this makes it eminently clear that he does not consider atomic power an option.

### Miserable payment ethics

Since the organisation’s founding in 2009, 149 states have signed the statute and 50 have ratified it. “No international organisation has ever established itself so quickly. That gives us a unique legitimacy. IRENA offers a renewable energy platform to all of the key actors. Here, a constitutional framework and an agenda for the spread of renewable energies can be formulated,” says Amin.

The great interest in IRENA membership is only one side of the coin, however. Many of the large member states have not paid their dues, which has severely restricted the agency’s ability to act. That is because, while the dues are already an integral part of the budget, they are not mandatory until IRENA has permanent status. That will not happen until after the first plenary meeting in April. Even after that, the dues are only mandatory for the countries which have

ratified the statute. The trouble is that amongst the 50 ratifications are numerous small island nations that only pay a few dollars a year toward the budget, while the potential main funders, such as the US, the UK, France and Japan, have not yet ratified the statute.

The minutes from preparatory meetings for the plenary session indicate that the 2011 budget is some US\$ 24 million, much of which will come from special payments from the UAE and Germany. Just over half of the budget will be covered by the contributions of member states. That is not a particularly good sign from an agency that purports to act internationally and independently.

Amin is optimistic, however, when it comes to the future willingness of donor countries. “There is a very strong willingness to support renewable energies. The people want it just as much as governments and international organisations.” Many of the donor countries, however, had viewed the management structures of the organisation with skepticism, according to Amin.

“But I think that in the past few weeks we have been able to dispel any doubts. The feedback is very positive. Our task is to build trust with governments, giving them confidence that with their investment in renewables they are spending their money in a sensible way and for the right things.” For that reason Amin wants to add as quickly as possible to IRENA’s very short list of projects, an e-learning platform in the area of political consulting and an energy road-map for the Pacific state of Tonga. “I met with representatives of the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) right after I took office. That organisation has been collecting information on insolation and wind speeds all over the world for more than a century,” Amin says. “We are also planning to work with the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO). The WIPO records all patents relating to renewable energy technologies. We are discussing how to design access to this information, how available technologies can be evaluated, and how they can be adapted to different conditions in different countries.” Amin’s goal is to build a kind of renewable energy database to enable political decision makers to reach rational decisions based on the current state of knowledge. That includes best-practices, information on the latest state of technical expertise, and effective financing mechanisms. “IRENA will not build any wind or solar farms; rather, we will point out where and how such facilities may be possible.”

So, there is much to be done. “A journey of a thousand miles starts with the first step, and IRENA has just taken the first step,” says Amin, circumscribing the monumental task he faces. There is so much to do, in fact, that just days before the application deadline for the Director-General position, Amin has yet to submit his paperwork. “But I’ll do it,” he says, smiling.

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**Further information:**  
IRENA: [www.irena.org](http://www.irena.org)



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